Reimagining brave spaces in Philadelphia: Intergenerational community partnerships for change

Faith Applegate, student of Urban Studies, History, and Urban Education, University of Pennsylvania
Jen Freed, doctoral student of Literacy Studies, University of Pennsylvania
Ariana Jiménez, student of BEPP and Management, University of Pennsylvania
Nina Wang, student of Political Science and French, University of Pennsylvania
*authors are listed in alphabetical order

Abstract

This piece documents the collaboration between a team of four University of Pennsylvania students and seven youth partners from across the Greater Philadelphia area who came together to discuss, understand, and take action toward civic issues impacting their communities. As youth arrived at the Civic Engagement Summer Program, a joint Philadelphia Youth Network and Netter Center for Community Partnerships High School Voter Project iteration, alongside adult facilitators, they navigated the complexities of civic literacy discussions and spaces. Together, the adult facilitators and youth participants engaged in dialogue about local government, pervasive gun violence impacting their communities, and voter registration inequities. This piece centers the following inquiries: What happens when educators consider the self-efficacy youth have with regard to addressing civic issues in their communities? What out-of-school civic literacy spaces and experiences might youth need to feel empowered to use their voices? What are the ways in which youths' existing literacies and knowledge inform the

way they talk about the issues they wish to address? What role do local universities have in working with youth through educational forums to learn more about the roles voting and local government play in ameliorating community issues, such as gun violence? Furthermore, this piece considers how these questions arose as the collaborative worked toward shared goals together (Plummer et al., 2019).

To address these collaborative inquiries, the team highlights five aspects of the Civic Engagement Summer partnership that enabled facilitators and youth to build trust: sustaining community partnerships, highlighting youths' existing funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), cultivating civic efficacy, reimagining critical civic literacy alongside youth, navigating intergenerational relationships and learning, and centering relationships (Campano, Ghiso & Welch, 2018; Plummer et al., 2019). With youths' consent, this article shares the history of the Civic Engagement Summer, and the discussions and experiences sparked by the 2023 iteration.

Keywords: Critical civic literacy, community-university partnerships, intergenerational learning, youth civic engagement, gun violence, youth voice, civic efficacy, collaborative problem solving research, youth participatory action research.

Sustaining community partnerships

The High School Voter Project (HSVP) is a nonpartisan student-led organization through the Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania. This Project focuses on promoting youth voter registration, civic engagement, and civic education. Founded in 2020 by Jay Falk originally as Civics Summer, an earlier version of today's Civic Engagement Summer, HSVP has since evolved. In the fall of 2020, the program expanded its scope to include school-year activities, such as organizing in-school voter registration drives, fostering partnerships with teachers, and offering afterschool programs at several high schools across the city.

In the summer 2023, Civic Engagement Summer marked its fourth year, hosting a paid six-week internship program for seven high school students in partnership with the Philadelphia Youth Network and the Netter Center for Community Partnerships. Throughout this program, youth interns delved into topics such as voter registration, voting rights history, and community advocacy alongside three undergraduate and one doctoral student program facilitators. Our program formed an intergenerational community consisting of high-school, college-aged, and doctoral student researchers from across Philadelphia. Together, we gathered daily to explore our civic motivations, sociopolitical perspectives, and civic identities through writing and dialogue (Freed et al., 2024).

As educators and community partners, we arrived at the Civic Engagement Summer program invested in better understanding how an out-of-school, critical civic literacy program could support youth to continue to "read the word and the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1987). We recognized our responsibility as informal educators in creating non-traditional learning spaces, where youth openly discuss issues of injustice in their communities through culturally-relevant

pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Understanding the valuable existing relationships youth had with the Netter Center for Community Partnerships, we aimed to integrate critical theory, literacy, and practice to complement existing school civics education with grassroots civic problem-solving and more participatory approaches to learning. During our first day of programming, when our facilitation team invited youth to debate their favorite musicians and artists, we noticed that when asked to engage in discussions on topics about which they were passionate, youth interns gained confidence and quickly became more vocal.

Critical literacy scholars contend that literacy is a form of "cultural production" and a significant vehicle through which people dialogue about our world (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Street, 1984 as cited in Mirra, 2012). Given our collective aim to foster discussions about social justice with our program, we consistently found that we needed to refine our understandings of what civic literacy *is* and *is not* through ongoing discussions, written reflections, and collaborative multimodal projects with youth.

Civic Engagement Summer also required us to reimagine what a brave space might look like with youth and families. In our program, the concept of a brave space was cultivated through both the physical and emotional learning environment. Though our program was originally assigned a small classroom with no windows, we collaborated with youth to identify the type of environment in which they wanted to learn. Then, we quickly relocated to another study room with couches and floor-to-ceiling windows, so as to create a comfortable space more conducive to free-flowing conversations. Each day, we began with a question, freewrite, game, or conversation starter to shift the focus from the facilitator as decision-maker to youth as co-facilitators in learning. Our community space privileged inquiry, honesty, and play, opening the floor for youth to share connections and questions. We valued humility and aimed to be

aware of our own positionality in relation to youths' lived experiences given that two of our four team members were not from Philadelphia. Humility, coupled with more horizontal approaches to learning and co-facilitating, helped us reshape our partnership and allowed us to recenter youths' experiences and knowledge.

Highlighting youths' existing funds of knowledge

Civic Engagement Summer's curriculum builds upon youths' interests and backgrounds. While youth learned about voter registration and U.S. elections, many of them were not old enough to register to vote. Consequently, the program predominantly explored alternative advocacy methods available to youth, such as meeting with legislators, organizing voter registration drives, collaborating with nonprofits, writing opinion editorials, and forming partnerships with fellow community advocates.

The 2023 cohort met with three local legislators: State Rep. Rick Krajewski, City Councilmember Kendra Brooks, and City Councilmember Jamie Gauthier. Prior to these meetings, youth shared their perspectives with each other on some of the most pressing issues in the city and collectively selected topics to discuss with the legislators. The foundation of these conversations stemmed from the youths' experiences and expertise from growing up in Philadelphia and attending local schools. Highlighting youths' backgrounds was critical to crafting comprehensive advocacy proposals that centered youth voices.

The youth developed three projects focused on addressing gun violence, discrimination, and the public education system in Philadelphia. Each presentation began with youth sharing personal narratives emphasizing why the topic was important to address. For example, one youth reflected on an experience with gun violence in their neighborhood, while another youth discussed their school's history with asbestos contamination. Then, the youth transitioned into

presenting statistical data and research underscoring the severity of each issue, followed by outlining the policy proposals they co-constructed.

Youth also authored opinion editorials, with several published online through *The Bullhorn*, a local student-run newspaper. One youth intern wrote a passionate and poignant piece addressing gun violence in Philadelphia. The article began by recounting a mass shooting that deeply affected her family. Highlighting statistics in Philadelphia, she called for change at the legislative level based on her experiences and the research she conducted.

Drawing on youth's existing funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) – encompassing their literacies, cultures, and histories – is necessary for cultivating an inclusive, engaging, and more democratic environment and partnership for all participants. Youth did not enter the program space as blank slates; rather, they brought with them rich experiences, diverse perspectives, and local knowledge from growing up in Philadelphia. Our approach to the Civic Engagement Summer program incorporated culturally responsive teaching strategies and emphasized the incorporation of youths' lived experiences into co-constructed lesson plans. This commitment to building on these lived experiences and integrating civic knowledge and skills enabled youth to actively engage with and make connections to otherwise unfamiliar content (Will and Najarro, 2023). By aligning our curriculum to youths' prior knowledge and relevant issues within the Philadelphia community, the facilitation team observed heightened enthusiasm in youths' excited participation in discussions and advocacy work. Consistently, youth noted through interviews and informal group dialogue, that our emphasis on important civic discussions made the learning environment, collaboration, and lessons less restrictive and more creative.

Cultivating civic efficacy

The Civic Engagement Summer's goal is to create a space for critical exploration of civic issues and inquiries with the aim of promoting youth civic efficacy. Research by Hipolito-Delgado and Zion (2017) suggests that engaging in critical civic inquiry helps enhance civic efficacy among youth of marginalized backgrounds by fostering psychological empowerment. This type of inquiry involves intentional exploration of social issues, facilitated by collaboration with adults and active youth participation in dialogue (p. 714-715).

As adult facilitators of Civic Engagement Summer, we supported youth in exploring their social concerns by creating brave spaces for them to share their experiences, thoughts, and questions. We emphasized, modeled, and nurtured youth advocacy skills, discussing ways to address these issues. Additionally, we acknowledged and discussed historical and systemic barriers to civic participation. Working closely with youth interns, we collaborated to identify pathways for change and translate dialogue into actions.

Over the six week program, youth interns organized two voter registration drives, wrote opinion editorials for the student-run newspaper, *The Bullhorn*, met with local legislators, and pursued other actionable initiatives to understand how to effect change in their communities. Youth drove these hands-on activities, and they required extensive preparation involving careful research and planning. For instance, prior to each meeting with legislators, the youth interns developed fact sheets and policy proposals to present, rehearsing their presentations multiple times beforehand, to practice their facilitation skills.

Civic Engagement Summer highlighted ways to turn dialogue into actionable change. These experiences collectively emphasized youths' criticality that they bring to their worldviews and the issues that matter to them, highlighting their change-making potential with the aim of fostering civic efficacy. Most of our youth interns, all who hold one or more marginalized

identities, came into the summer program expressing a sort of helplessness in the face of pressing social issues as well as a lack of interest in voting. This relates to Banks' notion of "failed citizenship," a phrase that describes how marginalized groups are denied full inclusion into their nation-state, fueling a lack of political and civic efficacy among these groups (Banks, 2017, p.366). Civic Engagement Summer hopes to tackle this by cultivating a passion for change-making among youth, addressing marginalization while also highlighting youth agency. Through dialogue and hands-on activities, youth spend the summer engaging in civic dialogue and action. Furthermore, research shows that fostering strong political and civic efficacy in marginalized youth promotes future civic engagement and actions (Wegemer, 2023, p. 232). Civic Engagement Summer aims to contribute to this mission so that youth will feel inspired to continue to take civic action throughout their lifetime.

Reimagining critical civic literacy

In addition to Civic Engagement Summer's goal of cultivating and dialoguing about youth civic efficacy, our program also aimed to highlight the ways in which youth are already engaging in critical civic literacy practices while empowering them to reimagine what it looks like to be civically engaged. We define critical civic literacy as the recognition that being civically engaged requires thoughtful consideration and deliberation, preparing individuals to be responsible, critical, and engaged community members. For instance, when youth learn to critically assess media and news sources, and engage in inquiry-based conversations about voting with peers and strangers, they demonstrate a deep-seated understanding of critical civic literacy.

As underscored in *Critical Literacy Initiatives for Civic Engagement*, "critical literacy is necessary for responsible citizenship in a world" where individuals face an abundance of

misinformation (Cartwright and Reeves, 2019). Discussing politics can be challenging for young people, especially given the current tensions and polarization of the United States political landscape. Therefore, our program sought to encourage youth to engage with current events and civic issues critically and openly. Youth mentioned that their primary source of local and national news was social media, a platform often known for misinformation. To equip youth with the skills needed for civic action and critical discourse, we facilitated a lesson on media literacy, modeling how to identify credible news articles, carry an inquiry stance when reading (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), and effectively research civics-related information online. Within the framework of critical civic literacy, it was crucial for youth to understand the importance of being well-informed, approaching each text and piece of information with criticality and reading beyond polarizing and/or sensationalized headlines.

Additionally, Civic Engagement Summer approached discussions and activities with the understanding that each young person holds their own opinions, beliefs, and judgements about civic engagement, informed by past experiences and backgrounds. As program facilitators, our team helped youth draw parallels to individuals within the broader community. This approach aligns with Keegan's analysis that fostering youth awareness of the role emotions and personal experiences play in civic education helps prepare them for civic participation (Keegan, 2021).

Critical civic literacy extends beyond reading news and other forms of literature; it is also demonstrated through insightful discussions with others. In preparation for hosting voter registration drives, our facilitator team collaborated with youth to engage community members in dialogue about the purposes and reasons for voting. Instead of one-sided conversations about the importance of voter registration, we encouraged the youth to ask follow-up questions to understand community members' personal perspectives on civic participation. Discussing

strategies for approaching community members who seemed indifferent or resistant to voting helped youth understand the *why* behind community members' engagement levels. Recognizing that some youth participants might have had reservations about politics, we invited local leaders and activists to our sessions and into our space to facilitate transparent conversations about community issues and concerns, building trust and understanding.

Civic Engagement Summer aimed to create opportunities for youth to understand that community members' feelings towards politics are valid reasons that influence their willingness and ability to participate civically, including through voting. Through discussions on *why* and *how* people vote, we discovered, together, that it is not necessarily "wrong" or "ignorant" for someone to be hesitant about voting due to negative past experiences. Our program collaborated with youth participants to identify effective ways to engage and encourage increased civic participation among those who desire it.

In imagining the future of civic literacy spaces, educators face the challenge of fostering meaningful civic dialogue and co-creating critical literacy environments with young people. Teachers are already navigating and analyzing the various modes, platforms and outlets through which civic issues are engaged with on a daily basis.

We advocate for a reciprocal approach to teaching, recognizing that youth have valuable insights to share about their communities, lived experiences, and civic interests. Young people are already using their voices to address their circumstances and the issues that matter to them. As educators, we must continue to highlight youths' multiple literacies and knowledge to better understand how these might shape their discussions about issues they wish to address. We must continually ask ourselves how we can integrate youths' experiences into schools to co-facilitate

dialogue about civic issues. By acknowledging the criticality in youths' worldviews, we can collaboratively work towards realizing the future we wish to see (Rymes, 2023).

Acknowledgments

Thank you, CES Seven, our incredible youth, Ada, Sam, Bex, Mari, Sentaj, Sedir, and Tairi, for teaching us. We appreciate your humor, transparency, bravery, collective genius, and contributions of mind and heart. We would not be able to think critically about the power of co-constructed inquiry spaces without you, and we look forward to seeing what you do next. Thank you to our Netter Center for Community Partnerships family, our incredible School District of Philadelphia educators, local leaders and activists, and, of course, families who have all encouraged our youth to use their voices. Thank you to the Graduate School of Education for providing a space for emerging literacy scholars to show up and share out. We are so grateful for the opportunity to continue to capture and build upon our deep intergenerational work with youth.

youths' names changed for anonymity

References

Banks, J. A. (2017). Failed Citizenship and Transformative Civic Education. Educational Researcher, 46(7), 366-377. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X17726741

Campano G., Ghiso M. P., Welch B. (2015). Ethical and professional norms in community-based research. *Harvard Educational Review*, 85(1), 29–49.

Cartwright, A. M., & Reeves, E. K. (2019). Critical Literacy Initiatives for civic engagement. IGI Global, Information Science Reference.

Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1987). Literacy: Reading the word and the world. Massachusetts: Bergin & Garvey Publishers.

González N., Moll L. C., Amanti C. (2005). Funds of knowledge: theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms. Lawrence Erlbaum.

Hipolito-Delgado, C. P., & Zion, S. (2017). Igniting the Fire Within Marginalized Youth: The Role of Critical Civic Inquiry in Fostering Ethnic Identity and Civic Self-Efficacy. Urban Education., 52(6), 699–717. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085915574524

Johnson, E., & Vasudevan, L. (2012). Seeing and hearing students' lived and embodied critical literacy practices. *Theory into Practice, 51*(1), 34-41.

Keegan, P. (2021). Critical affective civic literacy: A framework for attending to political emotion in the Social Studies Classroom. The Journal of Social Studies Research. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7368404/

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, *32*(3), 465-491. https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312032003465

Lytle, S. L. (2008). Practitioner inquiry and the practice of teaching: Some thoughts on "better." *Research in the Teaching of English*, 42(3), 373-379.

Mirra, N., & Garcia, A. (2022). Guns, Schools, and Democracy: Adolescents Imagining Social Futures Through Speculative Civic Literacies. *American Educational Research Journal*, *59*(2), 345–380. https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312221074400

Penuel, W. R., Peurach, D. J., LeBoeuf, W. A., Riedy, R., Barber, M, Clark, T., & Gabriele, K. (2018). Defining collaborative problem-solving research: *Common values and distinctive approaches.* Boulder, CO: LearnDBIR.

Plummer*, E., Stornaiuolo, A., & So-Qui-Li I, G.*, Lott, J.*, Marrero, C.L.*, McLaine, D.Z.*, Murray-Scott, D.*, Summers, K.*, Thompson, S.*, Torres, K.*, Williams, N.*, Monea*, B. (2019). Participatory ethnography: Developing a high school writing center in partnership. Perspectives on Urban Education, 16(1), 1-8.

Rymes, B. (2023). Panel Conversation with Doctoral Proseminar. Philadelphia, PA.

Stornaiuolo, A., & Nichols, T. P., & Vasudevan, V. (2018). Building spaces for literacy in school: Mapping the emergence of a literacy makerspace. *English Teaching: Practice & Critique,* 17(4), 357-370.

Wegemer, C. M. (2023). Critical Civic Motivation of Marginalized Youth: An Expectancy-Value Approach. Youth & Society., 55(2), 213–237. https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X211044522

Will, Madeline, and Ileana Najarro. "What Is Culturally Responsive Teaching?" Education Week, March 24, 2023. https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/culturally-responsive-teaching-culturally-responsive-pedagogy/2022/04.